

## ***Lent: The Season of Spiritual Renewal***

### ***Homily for Ash Wednesday***

***February 26, 2020***

The origin of the word “Lent” comes from an old English word that means to “lengthen”. Lent is associated, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, with the lengthening of the hours of daylight. Lent is therefore a season of anticipation as we look forward to the end of winter, the arrival of spring accompanied by new life that will reach its culmination in the long warm days of summer. But as we well know living here in Calgary there can still be a lot of winter left before we get to the balmy days of July!

That said, Lent is a season of renewal that is closely tied to the renewal of the earth that the months to come will usher in.

There is another way I want us to also think about Lenten Renewal. Although the word was not originally intended to be used this way, Lent is also a season where we remember the gift of our lives. Each one of us has received life as a gift, that has been “lent” to us. The ashes that mark this day remind us of this in very stark language. As the ashes are imposed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross these words may be pronounced:

***“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”.***

Now these words are a sober reminder to each of us that our earthly lives are to have the end in mind. We will be asked at some time to give up our life and return it to the one who gave it to us on loan in the first place. When we take this to heart then the other words that can also be used with the imposition of ashes are also brought to mind:

***“Repent and believe in the Gospel”***

Repentance means to have a renewal of mind, similar to the renewal that will greet us with the arrival of spring. The word repent comes from the Greek word *metanoia*. Meta means “change” and noia”: means mind. Just like metamorphosis means a “change” meta” of form “morphe”, metanoia means a change of mind that brings our thinking into greeter conformity with the Gospel. This is the good news of Jesus Christ that is to form the basis of how we think, which in turn will influence how we live.

This is why each year we are invited again to enter into a period of spiritual renewal. Because of the experience of life in this world, we can become spiritually like the frozen February soil, lifeless and rock solid. But when we allow for the forty days of Lent to work on our minds and in our hearts, we can look forward to a spiritual spring at Easter time, even if the April thermometer is still below zero. (LET’S HOPE NOT).

It is with this renewal in mind that today’s scriptures speak so emphatically about the importance we have to be purposeful in our deepening relation with the Lord Jesus and his Church over these next six weeks.

From Joel we hear again these words:

*<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with all your heart,  
<sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the LORD, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.*

*<sup>16</sup>gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.*

These words celebrate the steadfast love of God that when at work in our lives inspires the kind of renewal where, as a people we gather together to remember who we are in relation to who God is. This is why Lent is both a corporate and individual season. There are special liturgies will celebrate only at this time of the year so that together we can then encourage one another to the kind of personal renewal where with David we sing:

*<sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
<sup>2</sup>Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
<sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

This kind of renewal has been associated from the earliest of centuries with the threefold invitation of Lent, alms giving, prayer and fasting. As I have reflected on the triple call of Jesus to alms giving, prayer and fasting, something impressed itself upon me that I have not seen before. Why is it I asked that prayer is the second of the three?

This is the answer I came up with. Prayer is like the hinge on the door that opens allowing us to go into the privacy of our homes. It is also the hinge that allows us to in turn go out into the world. Jesus wants us to understand therefore the prayer is the central invitation we are offered at the beginning of Lent. In turn as we grow in prayer, we invited to turn to that place of quiet in our heart, where we will willingly fast from good things that we enjoy. For what reason? So that we can yearn for a deepening renewal in our interior life. When we choose to, out of love for Jesus, practice what are called the ascetic disciplines the Holy Spirit is given permission to work on our hearts in that most private place. This in turn opens us to become a more generous people so that as we go out into the world, we are displaying a generosity of heart by the care we show to others, given the name of alms giving. Throughout the Lenten Season we will explore practical ways you can enter into the Lenten invitation to discover more fully how the hinge of prayer can open the door of your soul into the secret place of your heart while at the same time

enabling you to engage in the world as a person who is discovering more fully, that my life is a gift. Lent invites me, invites you and invites us to take to heart this call to live meaningfully in the present as we make the most of these six weeks to enter into the Church's season of Spiritual Renewal.

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<sup>1</sup> [\*Catholic Daily Readings\*](#). (2009). Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.